Decentralization of Education: Experience in Nicaragua and El Salvador

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ACRONYMS

ACE	Asociación Comunitaria de Educación (El Salvador)
BASE	Basic Education [Project] (Nicaragua)
CAPS	Central American Peace Scholarship [Program]
CDE	Consejo Directivo Escolar (El Salvador)
CEM	Consejo de Educación Municipal (Nicaragua)
EDUCO	Educación con Participación de la Comunidad (El Salvador)
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (El Salvador)
LAC	Latin America and Caribbean
MIC	Minicentros de Intercapacitación (Nicaragua)
MOE	Ministry of Education
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
OAS	Organization of American States
PREAL	Programa de Promoción de la Reforma Educativa en la América Latina (English: Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas)
SABE	Strengthening Achievement in Basic Education [Project] (El Salvador)

I. INTRODUCTION

Following the World Education for All Conference held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, education has received considerable attention from governments and donors throughout the decade. The resolutions reached in Jomtien, such as broadening the scope of basic education, promoting equity, mobilizing resources, and developing a supportive policy context, have guided the restructuring of educational systems in numerous countries. Programs in support of educational decentralization have been at the core of this effort.

Governments have sought to restructure their educational systems primarily through the decentralization of certain services. The challenges faced by policymakers, educators, and donors in their efforts to design and implement effective educational reform policies are amply documented in literature on this subject.

USAID has a long history of assisting governments in educational reform efforts, particularly in the Africa and Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) regions. The numerous studies and reports funded by the Africa Bureau document in considerable detail the broad array of educational reform approaches and strategies implemented in the region.

This study begins by discussing a decentralization typology and policy guidelines. It then focuses on two recent decentralization efforts undertaken in the LAC region. Its purpose is twofold: to synthesize favorable conditions—as viewed in the literature—that promote successful educational reforms, and to examine the educational reforms in two LAC countries that have experienced similar circumstances, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Both countries sought to restructure their educational systems following years of neglect due to civil war and political strife. The next section offers comments on the value of educational decentralization.

A comprehensive bibliography and selected readings of major evaluations and studies on educational reform, particularly on decentralization of educational systems, is also included. Given the attention that this topic has received this decade, the bibliography concentrates primarily on documents issued since 1990. For easier reference, there are two bibliographies: one organized by donor or publisher and one in alphabetical order.

II. DECENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATION

Background

A significant body of research and evidence exists which shows that quality education is crucial to the economic and social development of a country. Education provides the infrastructure for long-term development, and it is the key to strengthening democratic institutions and increasing the productive capacity of a nation.

The shift since the 1980s to democratic governance, decentralization, and market economies requires that countries restructure their educational systems and invest in developing their human capital. These economic and political changes are particularly evident in countries that have undergone a democratization process or whose economies have expanded to include industry, manufacturing, trade, and services.

> "All over the world it is taken for granted that education achievement and economic success are closely linked– that the struggle to raise a nation's living standards is fought first and foremost in the classroom."
>
> *The Economist*
> March 29, 1997

To promote socioeconomic development and compete globally, countries will require a skilled and educated labor force able to make informed decisions, assume participatory roles in the democratic system, and adapt to changing circumstances. A recent OAS study states that: "Education is not only a current issue, but a political, economic, and social priority demanded by all"[1] (Schiefelbein 1997, 5).

Education is no longer an issue relegated to individual countries, but a subject of global concern and importance. The various global conferences that took place in the 1990s drew agreements to reduce poverty with specific goals in education: "By 2000, achieve universal access to basic education and the completion of primary education by at least 80% of primary school age children, and by 2015, universal primary education in all countries" (*UN Human Development Report* 1997).

By 1995, more than 100 countries had developed strategies to achieve education for all, total primary enrollment had risen by about 50 million since 1990, and the number of school age children out of school was reduced from 130 million to 110 million (*UN Human Development Report* 1997).

To achieve these improvements, governments have implemented educational reforms largely through the decentralization of their educational systems. While there is no consensus in the

[1] "La educación no es sólo un tema de actualidad sino una prioridad política, económica y social exigida por todos."

literature as to the effect of decentralization on student achievement, studies do not rule out decentralization as an effective mechanism for improving the delivery of educational services. Governments that have instituted local governance of education understand better their direct clients and are able to respond to their changing needs more effectively. The following section briefly discusses the concept of decentralization and includes a typology for decentralization.

Decentralization Typology

The wealth of literature dealing with educational policy reform discusses the concept of decentralization from a wide variety of perspectives. Governments have approached this issue from varying historical, economic, and political circumstances relying upon a range of approaches, such as redistributing authority and responsibility among the central government and local communities, involving isolated groups in the decision-making process, strengthening local administrative capacity, or privatizing services.

Democracies newly instituted during the 1980s, particularly in Latin America, have viewed decentralization of education as a means to legitimize their status, establish mechanisms of accountability that lead to improved efficiency, reduce the financial burden that increasingly complex educational systems impose, or reduce educational bureaucracy by placing its administration at the local level.

Several interpretations and applications of decentralization are discussed in the literature. Dennis Rondinelli (1990) provides a useful typology that describes four main types of decentralization based on the amount of authority transferred and the degree of autonomy afforded to various local units:

> *Deconcentration*: Provides the least amount of autonomy to local units. Authority is transferred from the central ministry to ministry offices located outside the capital city. While the workload may be shifted with a reduced delegation of authority, the central government continues to provide control, particularly in the area of financing.[2]
>
> *Delegation*: Limits the control exerted by the central government. Organizations such as public enterprises or corporations that have the ability to generate funds are given authority to carry out specific functions but respond to the central government. The government may grant subsidies or assistance to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to perform certain educational functions.
>
> *Devolution*: Involves creating or empowering local government units to administer certain functions, and decision-making authority is devolved to these entities. While the central government may provide some funds, it exerts limited

[2] Deconcentration has been a common form of decentralization in Latin America. Peru, Colombia, and Chile are examples of this (Winkler 1989).

control. Parental involvement and financial contributions are an important aspect of locally controlled school systems.

Privatization: Shifts responsibility for fund raising, management, service delivery, and all other functions of the educational system to NGOs, corporations, or other private entities. The central government no longer exercises any responsibility of the educational system.

Regardless of which decentralization mechanism a government selects, however, shifting authority from the central to the local level is a complex and lengthy process which involves several sectors of society and requires a wide range of delicate political, legal, and financial negotiations.

A 1997 PREAL (Program to Promote Educational Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean) publication states that "successful decentralization requires knowing the stated and unstated goals driving reform." Eight interrelated goals are identified by the author: accelerated economic development, increased management efficiency, redistribution of financial responsibility, increased democratization through the distribution of power, greater local control through deregulation, market-based education, neutralizing competing centers of power, improving the quality of education (Hanson 1997b, 6).

Hanson proposes several policy guidelines useful in achieving these goals:

Begin with an analysis of the current educational system. An understanding of the existing educational system will allow policymakers to design a more effective reform.

Understand the stated and unstated goals of the reform. It is important to understand how parents, teachers, education authorities, and other key individuals view how each type of goal will affect them.

Develop a common vision of reform among potentially competing centers of power. This is essential to foster an environment of collaboration and reduce conflict. Establishing an open flow of ideas and information aids in developing a common vision.

Develop a plan that is simple, clear, and realistic. The plan should specify the necessary preconditions for change, such as training legal and local staff, modifying traditional decision-making roles, and financing mechanisms at the central and regional levels.

Conduct an organizational and management analysis early in the process. This is important to determine where in the system specific responsibilities and authority should be assigned. Assignments should not be made until the essential support exists to carry out decisions.

Transfer authority incrementally, rather than all at once. This allows the various players to adopt change gradually as they are ready. The complexity of a decentralization program, often coupled with lack of experience with the process, requires an incremental approach and allows people to learn lessons from their experiences.

Be willing to share power. Senior officials must be willing to give up or share power with regional officials. Officials who have experience managing a centralized system are not always the best candidates to manage a decentralized one.

Think long-term. Reforms are built by overcoming a series of challenges at the central and local levels. Years pass before reform occurs.

Hanson (1997b, 7) concludes that "the chances for successful change are greatly enhanced if the decentralization process results in transferring positive opportunities to local entities rather than problems or burdens, such as badly maintained schools, poorly trained teachers, or heavier financial demands without the means to pay."

In any decentralization effort, governments must balance the devolution of certain managerial, financial, and pedagogical responsibilities with the need to keep other functions centralized. This means that ministries must establish a governance mechanism that oversees the administration of a decentralized system while maintaining some ability to provide leadership, guidance, and direction to the reform process. "Devolution, rather than delegation of authority, has a better chance for long-term success because it provides for continuity in the process of change" (Hanson 1997b, 5).

Considering the multiplicity of challenges that governments face as they decentralize decision-making power, it would not be a practical exercise for policymakers to develop a guide or blueprint to design and implement a reform process. Education scholars have identified, however, favorable conditions that contribute to successful reform policies, which may have wide applicability. They underscore the importance of these conditions not only in designing effective reform programs but also in providing focus and movement to the reform.

III. FAVORABLE CONDITIONS THAT ENABLE DECENTRALIZATION

Given that educational reform is not an end in itself but an ongoing process, it seems more practical to discuss conditions or factors that need to be present in a country rather than lessons learned. There is considerable coincidence in the literature reviewed between lessons learned in educational reform and conditions that promote successful reforms. Most lessons learned illustrate the lack of certain conditions present in a country. Thus, this section synthesizes favorable conditions that give impetus and sustain reform efforts in a country, as identified by education scholars.

These conditions are organized under six major categories. The key resources consulted to identify and synthesize this information are listed at the end of the section.

Policy Formulation

National mandate – The mandate for reform needs to come from the top executive leaders with an equal commitment to allocating the necessary financial and human resources to maintain the reform efforts. It must be viewed as a priority on the political agenda.

In concert with other reforms – Educational reform efforts will gain greater support if they take place in connection with other reforms, rather than as an isolated policy. The country needs to be receptive to open dialogue.

Political Will

Top-level leadership – High-level officials must take a decisive role in carrying out this mandate. Educators, municipal officials, and community leaders implementing the reform will require the expertise, guidance, and leadership from a core of government officials who are committed to the reform effort and have demonstrated the ability to build a political consensus for change. This support should also include the technical assistance required to carry out research, collect data, and conduct policy analysis.

Length of service of ministry staff – This condition is linked to the one above. If implementers of the reform require strong leadership from senior officials, frequent staff turnover will weaken the continuity of the reform process. Experienced, long-term staff will bring greater credibility to any adjustments or innovations proposed and be in a stronger position to provide guidance and continue the reform.

Strong central government – A strong central government is crucial to a successful reform process. The role and function of the central government changes drastically as decision-making is devolved to local units. Governments that are directly involved in the delivery and management of services have to switch roles to facilitate processes, build consensus, provide leadership, and formulate policy. Likewise, governments that have traditionally imposed a rigid hierarchical rule now have to transfer power and grant autonomy to municipalities, community

councils, or local schools. These far-reaching changes require a stable and strong central government to implement, strengthen, and sustain the process of decentralization effectively.

Stakeholder Involvement

Demand driven – Society must demand reform efforts when faced with unacceptable conditions, such as low completion rates, high repetition and truancy rates, frequent teacher strikes, inadequate teacher involvement. These factors often lead society to endorse changes, as well as demand greater efficiency and accountability from the educational system.

Community support and participation – If the reform is to be demand driven, both the issues to be addressed and the potential solutions need to be generated by those directly affected by the changes: the teachers, parents, students, community members—the direct clients of the reform. This process involves creating mechanisms, as well as providing resources and guidance that foster the development and growth of cohesive community groups. Communities that strive to work as integrated entities, that take ownership of decisions, and that exercise the appropriate level of leadership will achieve greater autonomy and independence in decision-making.

Program Design

Comprehensive system reform – An educational system is composed of a complex set of interrelated mechanisms, and reforms made on any one of its components have repercussions on several others. For instance, changes in curriculum affect the way teachers prepare lessons, which in turn has an impact on student assessment. Thus, an effective reform effort must take into account the system as a whole and not attempt to make changes on isolated components.

Information Dissemination

Information gathering and dissemination – If the changes made on one part of the system have multiple effects, then collecting, analyzing, and publishing data must be an integral component of the reform effort. The need to establish mechanisms to carry out this activity should not be underestimated. This condition recognizes the importance of the role of research and analysis in policy formulation. This analysis may be carried out by a group of NGOs with the ability to conduct research, analyze findings, and publicize results, particularly in countries where there may not be a sufficient number of expert officials who can undertake this effort.

The implementation of policy reforms involves the participation of several sectors of society, and using the technical support available in civil society increases support for the reform. "To improve the educational quality of the region it is essential that all reform strategies be based on results gathered through research"[3] (Schiefelbein 1997, 20).

[3] "Para mejorar la calidad educativa de la región es fundamental que toda estrategia de cambio se base en resultados de investigaciones."

Policy dialogue – This factor is related to the previous one. It refers to establishing a process of communicating reform efforts to all affected entities. The demand for information, policy analysis, and open dialogue is greater in rapidly democratizing societies. Dissemination mechanisms need to be explored through public debates, forums, or conferences to ensure that the citizenry have the appropriate avenues to express their views, debate issues, and clarify concerns. Transparency in decision-making lends accountability to the process. In societies undergoing democratization, it is crucial to bring together a diverse group of people who are able to contribute and solve problems from a variety of perspectives.

Administrative Mechanisms

Linkages between the central and local government – Policy decisions and directives at the national level require an office responsible for translating national policy into operational programs. This process involves developing the necessary strategies to translate national mandates into uniform operational systems. It may involve issuing operational manuals, developing and monitoring performance indicators, disseminating key information, or providing a forum for discussion. Without this function, the government runs the risk of having local entities develop multiple interpretations and applications of the same policy decisions. "The point is that without an entity in place whose job is to help make all of this happen, purposeful reform will at best be happenstance" (*Education Reform Support, Vol. III*, 7).

The above discussion shows that it is not enough to legislate changes, allocate funds, or create mechanisms to implement a reform effort. Governments and donors must take into account the numerous social, political, policy, and organizational factors—unique to each situation—that will provide impetus to the reform process and allow the structures of authority and power at the central and local levels to solidify.

Key Resources (Favorable Conditions)

Crouch, Luis et al. 1997. *Education Reform Support Series*. Vol. 3 *A Framework for Making It Happen.*

Final Report of the Nicaragua Basic Education Project (BASE). 1998. Washington: Academy for Educational Development.

Formulating Education Policy: Lessons and Experience from Sub-Sahara Africa. Six Case Studies and Reflections from DAE 1995 Biennial Meetings. 1995. Paris: UNESCO.

Hanson, Mark. 1997. *Educational Decentralization: Issues and Challenges*. No. 9, Washington: PREAL.

Policy Dialogue and Reform in the Education Sector. 1993. Education and Human Resources Technical Services Project, Academy for Educational Development. Washington: USAID. (PN-ABP-929)

Prawda, J. 1992. *Educational Decentralization in Latin America: Lessons Learned.* A view from LATHR. No. 27. Washington: World Bank.

Schiefelbein, Ernesto. 1997. *Educación en las Américas: Calidad, Equidad y Ciudadanía.* Washington: OAS.

IV. COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

This section examines the educational reforms undertaken in two countries emerging from a decade of political strife and armed conflict, Nicaragua and El Salvador. The reforms in both countries were designed to address serious deficiencies in the educational system caused by years of violence and neglect. The case studies examine the political and social contexts in which the reforms took place in each country, as well as the processes and challenges faced by both governments to implement reform efforts.

In Nicaragua, the decision to reform the educational system originated from the government. From the outset, there was significant top-level leadership and commitment from the Minister of Education and senior officers to bring about comprehensive improvements. This is demonstrated in the establishment of the Municipal Education Councils and the initiative to pilot test reform policies in three municipalities before expanding decentralization to the entire country.

To address the grave deficiencies in all aspects of the educational system, a system-wide reform was implemented based on three key areas: institutional strengthening, teacher training, and curriculum development. Initially, the government established two models of decentralization: the autonomous school and the municipal councils. The first model gained greater acceptance and was later adopted.

The timely and reliable flow of up-to-date information on performance containing statistics, costs, inputs, and outputs is a crucial resource when responsibility is transferred to local levels of government. The management information system established in Nicaragua is a key element in collecting and disseminating this type of information. A financial management system that integrates the accounting and budgeting functions, and a modern information system were adapted and installed. With these capabilities, ministry officials are able to retrieve current information on a regular basis, which greatly enhances their ability to manage a decentralized system and make policy decisions.

The numerous changes in personnel at the senior ministry level, however, (virtually all senior staff was replaced in 1996 and also in 1997 following the elections) has affected the continuity and progress of the reform. “The frequent and pervasive changes in management level personnel...has worked against the establishment of management norms and development of a common management culture” (*Final Report of the Nicaragua Basic Education Project (BASE)* 1998).

In El Salvador, the reform followed a participatory approach that promoted policy dialogue. By the time the educational reform was enacted, several events had taken place that were instrumental in identifying and analyzing the pressing educational needs of the country. The numerous assessments and studies conducted by diverse groups of people show the political will and leadership of the government to ensure that reform policies responded to actual educational needs. A concerted effort was made to incorporate the recommendations outlined in the various studies conducted into policy decisions.

Likewise, early experiences with rural educational programs, such as EDUCO, had mobilized communities to address and seek solutions for their schools. At the time of the reform, several strategies were already in place that needed to be expanded. An atmosphere of policy dialogue had been created that involved diverse sectors of the community at the regional and local levels. A demand for reform was born from the direct needs and concerns of the community.

As in Nicaragua, the need for education reform in El Salvador has been supported and forcefully articulated by the government. "The importance of the clear vision held by El Salvador's President and leadership in the MOE regarding the need for education reform is perhaps the most critical driving force" (*Mid-term Evaluation of the Stengthening Achievement in Basic Education (SABE)* 1994, 1).

After a turbulent past in both countries that eroded their social fabric, the governments identified the consolidation of peace and democracy as one of the purposes of the educational reform. Education was considered to be a unifying element that would integrate the various factions of the society. Whether or not the educational reforms in both countries contribute to achieving peace and democracy is a matter of future analysis and study. The reforms are recent, and it will take a few more years before we can assess the effect and sustainability of the numerous changes enacted.

The following section examines the political and social conditions in both countries that led to the decentralization of their school systems. It outlines the various stages of the process and provides preliminary findings. The Nicaragua case study was reviewed by the BASE project Chief of Party, David Edgerton and AED's Program Officer, John Gillies. The El Salvador case study was reviewed by Bill Harwood, USAID/San Salvador.

Educational Decentralization in Nicaragua

Throughout the 1980s, the civil war waged in Nicaragua left deep divisions in its weakened democratic institutions. Education also suffered significant setbacks during this period. The destruction of school facilities, the need to put children to work, and the displacement of populations had a disastrous effect on the educational system. In 1984, there were 75,000 children without schooling; by 1987, this number had increased to over 149,000; and by 1988, it was estimated that 200,000 children were outside the educational system (Arnove and Dewes 1991).

The lack of technical expertise at the ministry level to design effective policies, the inadequate number of trained teachers, and the lack of textbooks and relevant curricula further contributed to a considerable decline in the quality of education. Furthermore, during its last two years, the Sandinista government substantially reduced the education and health sectors, and a high number of ministry personnel were laid off (Arnove and Dewes 1991).

When the government of Violeta Chamorro took office in 1989, the improvement of basic education was a priority crucial to the economic, social, and democratic recovery of the country. The decision of the government to decentralize education was based on three main objectives: to promote democracy through popular participation; to use the public funds allocated for education

more efficiently; and to encourage parents, teachers, and other members of the community to support the schools. The expectation was that the direct involvement of the main users of school services in the decision-making process would enhance their sense of ownership and provide more careful monitoring of the expenses. Likewise, encouraging parents to make financial contributions to the school would cause the high repetition and dropout rates to decrease.

Two key events took place in 1993 that launched the educational reform:

- The Ministry of Education issued the rules and regulations for primary and secondary education,[4] which established the Municipal Education Councils (CEM),[5] to whom the ministry delegated administrative responsibility for the schools. The CEMs were composed of representatives from the private sector, parents, teachers, government officials, and community leaders. The ministry transferred a fixed sum to the CEMs, which covered salaries and school maintenance costs. The schools supplement this amount through student fees and community contributions.

- The government signed agreements with the municipalities of Granada, Matagalpa, and San Pedro Lóvago to decentralize the administration of the primary schools within each municipality. Similar agreements were also signed with the school councils of 24 secondary schools. Before expanding decentralization to the entire country, the ministry chose to pilot test reform policies first in these three regions. The municipalities were selected based on the level of local leadership and the willingness of the parents and teachers to administer their schools' affairs.

The government also established autonomous centers—secondary schools administered by a governing council composed of the school principal, teacher representatives, and parents. The ministry transfers to the council a lump sum to cover staff salaries and school maintenance. This amount is supplemented by school fees and fund-raising activities.[6] These councils exert:

> *Pedagogical authority*, which includes selecting textbooks, deciding on curriculum content, and setting up student evaluation guidelines;
>
> *Administrative authority*, which involves hiring and firing the school principal and veto power over the principal's decision to hire and fire personnel; and
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> *Financial authority*, which involves managing the budget and preparing financial reports for the ministry and the community. (*Nicaragua's School Autonomy Reform: A First Look*. 1996. World Bank.)

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[4] Reglamento General de Educación Primaria y Secundaria

[5] Consejo de Educación Municipal

[6] Significant strides have been made by the autonomous schools in raising funds. An outstanding case is reported of a school in Matagalpa that has raised nearly half of its budget from local contributions (*Mid-term Evaluation of the Nicaragua BASE Project* 1996).

Initially, the ministry considered implementing both models, the CEMS and the autonomous schools. After some experimentation, however, the autonomous school model gained greater support and was adopted. In 1993, the ministry selected 20 large urban schools to become autonomous. By 1995, about 100 secondary schools participated in the reform process. The reform was also extended to primary schools, and by 1995 there were over 200 autonomous primary schools *(Nicaragua's School Autonomy Reform: A First Look*. 1996. World Bank).

Decentralization also involved the deconcentration of authority to the 19 regional offices of the ministry, which included transferring administrative functions, such as budgeting, accounting, logistics, and training and evaluation. The aim was to use scarce resources more efficiently, reduce bureaucracy at the central level, and strengthen the capacity of the ministry to implement educational policy more efficiently.

Basic Education (BASE) Project

Initiated in 1994, the five-year USAID-funded Basic Education (BASE) project addressed USAID/Managua's objective of improving the quality and efficiency of basic education. The project focused on three areas of the reform:

> *Institutional strengthening*, especially in the decentralization process, through which ministry staff received training in educational planning, management, and supervision of schools. This component also included assistance in developing personnel manuals, establishing a management information system, and implementing key policy decisions.
>
> *Curriculum development* includes the design and distribution of primary grade curricula and teacher guides in language, math, civic education, and social sciences.
>
> *Teacher training* involves designing and conducting training in selected schools to pilot test new teaching techniques presented in the new curricula. This also involves developing a model master teacher program to provide in-service teacher training for primary teachers.

The BASE project has made significant contributions in developing the capability of the ministry to manage the decentralization and policymaking processes. Through the institutional strengthening component, ministry personnel received training in strategic planning, financial management, human resource management, and information systems. All areas were geared toward providing support, direction, and guidance to the reform effort.

The automated management information system that was designed and established addressed the structure and processes of financial management. It consists of a computer network with the ability to provide on a regular basis accounting and budgeting information, along with educational statistics. This system was vastly simplified and modernized, and linked to program goals and activities. The flow of communication between the central and local offices—a vital element for the management and decision-making processes of a decentralized program—is

greatly enhanced through this system. It constitutes the "backbone of this [institutional strengthening] component" (Final Report of the Nicaragua Basic Education Project (BASE) 1998).

During the first two years of the project, a language and math curriculum for first and second grades was approved and disseminated. In the third year, curriculum guides for third and fourth grades in math, language, civics, and natural science were also developed and distributed. The pedagogical principles and methodologies addressed in these curricula were further expanded in a manual, *Basic Education Guide,* for teachers and school principals.

Under the teacher training component, the project provided extensive training for teachers in grades 1 through 4 in new methodologies and pedagogical techniques. Local training centers (MIC) were established—some 700 MICs are functioning—which consist of a national system of autonomous and self-sustaining teacher training centers through which the in-service teacher training function was decentralized.[7] While curriculum design and teacher training are traditional education activities, through the extensive assistance provided by the BASE project, both areas became reform elements in themselves.

Several issues are identified in the final report of the BASE project that need to be addressed, particularly in the area of institutional strengthening, in order for the reform initiatives to continue to prosper: greater level of political and financial commitment; appropriate training to prepare personnel to assume new responsibilities; qualifications of personnel to assume decentralized leadership positions; and increased support and resources to human resource development, such as the establishment of a staff training capacity at the ministry level.

Educational Decentralization in El Salvador

After 12 years of civil war, in 1992 the Government of Alfredo Cristiani and the FMLN,[8] the National Liberation Front, signed the Peace Accord in Mexico City. The accord called for national unity among diverse groups following a decade of violence and armed conflict.

The educational system suffered serious deficiencies during these years of neglect. From 1980 to 1992, the percentage of GNP allocated to education decreased from 3.6 percent to 1.5 percent. A household survey taken at the time of the Peace Accord indicated extremely low levels of education of the population between the ages of 15 and 59: 29 percent were illiterate, only 42 percent had completed the third grade, and 10 years of school were required to produce a primary education graduate.

[7] Minicentros de Intercapacitación (MIC)

[8] Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional

The above statistics are published in a USAID-funded assessment of the educational system in El Salvador conducted by Harvard University, the Central American University, and selected NGOs. The 1995 report comprises nine studies dealing with basic, secondary, university, vocational, and nonformal education; the effects of the economy on education, financing of education, and development of management skills; and the administration and decentralization of the educational system (Reimers 1995). The Harvard study offers four major recommendations:

- *Allocate more resources to education*, which comprises the basis for the other recommendations.

- *Give priority to basic education*, which involves focusing on the lower grades, making teaching materials available, and developing a teacher training program.

- *Decentralize the administration of education*, which entails delegating greater authority to the schools, encouraging the participation of parents, and seeking ways to privatize vocational education.

- *Foster quality of the system*, which includes emphasizing general skills to be acquired in primary and secondary education; revising degree programs at the university level; and establishing information systems to monitor and analyze the relationship between the inputs, processes, and products of the educational system.

The findings of the Harvard study were presented to a group of selected NGOs, which served as advisory groups and fostered dialogue between the ministry and civil society.

Two important events described below took place prior to the educational reform of 1995 that demonstrated the political will of the government to formulate policies through participation and consensus building. A wide range of individuals and entities representing various ideological and sectoral views participated in these events.[9]

In 1991, the Ministry of Education initiated a highly successful reform program, EDUCO (Education with Community Participation),[10] based on the premise that the active participation of parents and community leaders is crucial to achieving effective educational programs and systems. EDUCO comprised four key periods:

Design of the educational strategy. This included an extensive country-wide research study which revealed that the relationship between community and school, particularly in the areas most affected by the war, was very important. There were extremely poor communities that had raised funds to cover teachers' salaries, and teachers who worked in these areas exhibited a

[9] For a more detailed description of these events, see Bejar, Rafael. 1997. "Concertación y compromiso: dinámica de la reforma educativa en El Salvador 1989-1996." In *Senderos de Cambio*, edited by Benjamin Alvarez, 47-69. Academy for Educational Development. Washington: USAID.

[10] Educación con Participación de la Comunidad

greater sense of responsibility than those paid by the government. Parents were eager to establish a closer relationship with the schools.

Implementation of the pilot program and first phase of EDUCO. The most important issue was establishing a mechanism for transferring funds from the central government to the communities. The Community School Associations (ACE) were created to manage schools.[11] The ACEs had the authority to hire teachers, manage the enrollment, purchase materials, and maintain the schools. The ministry transferred funds to the ACEs, provided training, and monitored their performance.

Expansion of EDUCO. The expansion began in July 1991, and a year later, EDUCO was operating in 75 municipalities. The program established grades 1 through 2 in 70 percent of the municipalities and preschool in the remaining 30 percent. By the end of 1992, it was estimated that EDUCO had served close to 28,000 students. At the end of this period, EDUCO faced the following challenges: only ACE members were trained to work in the program, not the community as a whole; teachers had a greater level of responsibility than the training covered, the additional professional assistance they needed was not provided; and the teachers union resented the program and viewed it as a threat.

Growth of the program. From 1992 to 1997, EDUCO had completed the organization of its administrative bodies, served approximately 169,000 children, provided work for about 4,000 teachers, dealt with 1,700 ACEs, and created approximately 5,300 classroom sections from preschool to fifth grade (Bejar 1997).

EDUCO proved to be an appropriate strategy for providing educational services, particularly in rural settings. The fact that the implementation and expansion phases of the program took place in the midst of the civil war, particularly in the rural areas where the fighting was most severe, is a testament to the political will and leadership at the ministry level to address the educational needs of the country. The concepts, approaches, and solutions that it advanced were instrumental in the design of future educational reform programs.

The second event that demonstrated the political will of the government took place in 1994 when the President of the Republic created the National Commission of Education, Science, and Development comprising 12 representatives involved in the education sector.[12] Its report, entitled *Transform Education for Peace and Development in El Salvador*,[13] examines the major educational problems in the country and offers guidelines and solutions. The study was made public throughout the country and is considered a key document for conceptualizing the major educational problems and formulating solutions.

[11] Asociación Comunitaria de Educación

[12] Comisión Nacional de Educación, Ciencia y Desarrollo

[13] Transformar la Educación Para la Paz y el Desarrollo de El Salvador

Educational Reform, 1995

A National Forum on Educational Reform was convened in 1995 attended by more than 200 representatives of national and international organizations, as well as parents, teachers, and community leaders.[14] Working groups were formed around 13 major themes that examined salient issues and proposed solutions.

Following the issues and proposals that arose from the numerous multisectoral working groups and studies described above, the government enacted a series of legal and institutional reforms in the education sector. Strengthening the educational system was considered fundamental in reducing poverty and consolidating peace and democracy.

The numerous initiatives undertaken by the government to identify and define the educational needs of the country were instrumental in designing the educational reform. The objective of the reform was "to educate a new citizen who is more productive economically, shows greater social solidarity, is more participatory and tolerant politically, more respectful of human rights and more peaceful in his relations with others, more conscious of the value of nature, and better integrated culturally"[15] (Bejar 1997, 66).

The guidelines for the reform included in the 10-year plan (1995–2005) fall under the following major topics:

- *Increase coverage*, which involves expanding the EDUCO program to cover grade six.

- *Improve teaching quality*, which calls for curriculum reform for preschool, primary, secondary, higher, and adult education.

- *Institutional modernization*, which involves redefining the role that the ministry plays in the reform. It includes decentralizing the administration of local schools through school-management councils with the purpose of reducing bureaucracy and updating systems.

Bejar notes that through all these participatory processes, the Salvadoran society has found a context in which to grow. It has united by identifying its needs and formulating goals through the participation process. The active involvement of the community in seeking solutions to issues that affect them directly and the ability to organize and effect changes contribute to democratic participation and awareness building.

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[14] Foro Consultativo Nacional Sobre Reforma Educativa

[15] "Formar un nuevo ciudadano más productivo en lo económico, más solidario en lo social, más partici-pativo y tolerante en lo político, más respetuoso de los derechos humanos y por lo tanto más pacífico en sus relaciones con sus semejantes, más consciente del valor de la naturaleza e integrado en lo cultural."

Strengthening Achievement in Basic Education (SABE) Project

In its five-year plan (1989–1994), the government of Alfredo Cristiani identified four major focus areas to improve the educational system of the country (USAID SABE Project Paper 1990):

- Low education levels among the school-age population, especially in rural areas
- High illiteracy rates and low education levels in the population aged 15 and older
- Low quality and coverage of the education system
- Absence of formative education that foments moral and civic values

The USAID-funded SABE project (1990–1998) was designed to improve the relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency of basic education in kindergarten through sixth grades. It responds to the government's efforts to improve basic education, and it is a critical mechanism for carrying out the educational reform.[16] The design of the project addresses directly the issues of poor quality, coverage, low literacy rates, and enhanced moral and civic values as outlined by the government. Two major components compose the SABE project:

- *Curriculum and Instructional Program*, which includes the development of a national curriculum for kindergarten through sixth grades and national standards, tests, and educational materials. The aim is to develop a national curriculum, to establish a performance measurement system to monitor progress, and to develop educational materials.
- *Basic Education System*, which provides primarily technical assistance to the ministry in its decentralization efforts, improves educational administration, and increases the participation of parents and community.

With assistance from the SABE project and in consultation with all stakeholders, the Ministry of Education sought to decentralize virtually all its administrative and educational activities. By 1997, the following changes were in place in three main areas:

- *Department Offices*. Fourteen departmental ministry offices were established, equipped, and staffed. SABE assisted in the training of virtually all departmental personnel.

[16] *Relevance* refers to the extent to which learning objectives relate to the educational needs of the individual; *effectiveness* addresses whether or not the system produces individuals with the needed knowledge, skills, and attitudes; and *efficiency* refers to the relationship between inputs and outputs, with the aim of achieving the desired output at minimal cost (USAID SABE Project Paper 1990). The definitions ascribed to these terms in the SABE Project Paper are those commonly used in education literature.

- *Teacher training*. This activity has shifted to the 210 individual school districts. Each district covers approximately 25 schools. It is conducted through model schools.[17] As of 1997, all school districts had at least one model school responsible for providing support and expertise to all other schools in the district.

- *Individual school administration*. Decentralization efforts have been expanded from regional or district levels to individual schools themselves. This process is implemented through local school councils (CDE) and designed to reach all 5,000 public schools.[18] CDEs are legal entities made up of the school principal, two parents, two teachers, and two students, elected by their peers. The CDEs are responsible for managing funds and making decisions regarding school purchases and maintenance. By law, the parents are the treasurers of the CDEs.

Through the CDEs, the ministry has decentralized many of the decisions that can be made more effectively at the school level and parents have been included in this process. The ministry has also decentralized the teacher training function to the districts, and the CDEs determine the type of training that will best serve the teachers of the district.

The SABE project was extended from August 1998 to August 1999. The decentralization of training to the model schools is an activity that is unfolding. Under this plan, each district will determine its training needs, which will be funded through the model schools in a decentralized process.

[17] Models schools are called Escuelas Modelo de Desarrollo Educativo (EMDES).

[18] Consejo Directivo Escolar

V. THE VALUE OF EDUCATIONAL DECENTRALIZATION

The preceding examples of educational decentralization reflect far-reaching and complex legal, financial, and political processes. It is evident that educational reform is not a finite event completed after a few interventions are in place and a certain amount of funds have been invested. The successful implementation of the various reform systems is a continuous effort that needs to be constantly nurtured and strengthened through innovative ideas, resources, and committed leadership.

There is no consensus in the literature as to the impact of decentralization on student learning. In a 1992 World Bank study, Juan Prawda reports that "governments should be advised that…decentralization is not an end in itself and does not automatically accomplish productivity, equity, and quality improvements." It is interesting to note that none of the countries he surveyed—Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico—explicitly viewed the quality of the learning environment and academic achievement as rationale for decentralization. Rather, financial efficiency and power distribution were the main reasons for the reforms in these countries. Likewise, the reasons given by the governments of Nicaragua and El Salvador to decentralize their educational systems involved the consolidation of peace and democracy, more efficient use of resources, and greater community participation.[19]

Results in educational reform in terms of student achievement take a long time to materialize. Mechanisms need to be developed to translate reform policy into actual programs; new materials and curricula have to be designed and implemented; teachers have to be trained in applying the new methodologies; evaluation tools based on the new curricula need to be designed; local governing councils have to be formed, trained, empowered, and, ultimately, learn to make informed decisions and act independently. Each innovation builds on the preceding one and generates change. It requires persistent effort for all these reform practices to filter down to the classroom. It is an evolving process that takes time.

Regardless of the differences or similarities in educational reforms, however, most seek to place education on the same level as the political, economic, and social reforms that the new world order demands. They endeavor to reach the isolated and underserved sectors of society, deliver services more efficiently, and recognize the valuable contributions that diverse groups of people can provide.

The preceding discussion explores how decentralization efforts in El Salvador and Nicaragua widened participation at the local level thereby strengthening the democratic process. When governments mobilize community support, certain sectors of society—particularly those previously isolated—acquire more political power. The greater their ability to exercise this power, the greater the chances the reform will prosper.

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[19] The El Salvador National Plan for Social and Economic Reconstruction states that "poverty may be reduced through the development of human resources, [and] peace is constructed through a slow, complex process characterized essentially by learning" (*Comparative Education Review*, Feb. 1995).

In both countries, the direct clients of school services, the students, teachers, parents, entrepreneurs, community leaders—the citizenry—became actively engaged in the reform process. Whereas in the past education was the domain of the ministry only, the decentralization process has now made it an issue of concern for these groups of people. Society now is involved in education and recognizes that the success of the schools is its responsibility. Education gains political and social prominence, and educational policies and debates form part of the national discourse.

Whatever shortcomings an educational reform may have, there are now many more players around the table making decisions that affect their lives. Citizens acquire new rights and responsibilities, and several sectors of society are involved in the management of the schools and accountable to its results. These are indicators that educational reforms have merit.

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